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ABSTRACT

Experiences of the editors of communication journals can be drawn on for tips on how to get articles published. The editor of "Communication Quarterly" makes the final decision on whether a manuscript should be accepted, accepted with revisions, or rejected. Since revisions are requested in the vast majority of cases, authors should be prepared to revise their work. To ensure accuracy, authors should check all footnotes and quotations against the original sources. The percentage of manuscripts accepted for publication in 11 communication journals runs from 16% to about 36%; since articles rejected by one journal may be accepted by another, authors should be persistent in sending works to different journals, revising them to conform to each journal's style. "Communication Quarterly" figures show that those new to the field are as likely to get published as are full professors; beginning researchers may find it helpful to collaborate with a senior researcher. In deciding whether to publish a manuscript, editors weigh its newsworthiness, clarity, scholarship, and relevance to the field. Researchers should aim at sincere research into particular communicative behaviors and situations. (The paper includes tables showing publication ratios for 11 communication journals and academic status of "Communication Quarterly" authors.) (GW)

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ON GETTING PUBLISHED: AN EDITOR'S PERSPECTIVE

by

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A paper presented to the
Speech Communication Association of Pennsylvania

Shippensburg, Pa.

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ON GETTING PUBLISHED: AN EDITOR'S PERSPECTIVE

I want to thank Rudy Dobesh for inviting me to appear on this panel to discuss publishing from the perspective of a journal editor, not because I enjoy public speaking, but because he prompted me to do some homework on a question that I had been pursuing only tangentially, but which I had been finding of increasing interest: what are the patterns of publication in our discipline? I have been lucky enough to serve as an associate editor of two journals (QJS under Bob Scott, and Today's Speech under Hermann Stelzner), and as editor of another (Communication Quarterly, 1976-1978). That editorial perspective has made me aware of procedures and points of view that might be of use to those whom Rudy designated as the primary audience of this panel -- graduate students just beginning a research career.

My method will be simple: I will describe the procedure followed by our journal in reviewing manuscripts, offer some observations about your competition, survey the advice of referees about acceptance and rejection of manuscripts, and offer some suggestions about writing and research. I will confine myself to the question of publishing in academic journals.

In preparing the material that follows, I looked back through the files of three years of Communication Quarterly, as well as the files of my terms as a referee for QJS and Today's Speech. In addition, I wrote to the present and former editors of several other journals in our field, and they have sent along additional information and advice. I want to thank them here. They are Professors Ed Black, John Waite Bowers, Bert Bradley, Ralph Eubanks, Walt Fisher, Glenn Mills, Roger Nebergall, Donovan Ochs, Tom Scheidel, and Bob Scott. They all, with characteristic energy and helpfulness, replied with even more information and advice than I had asked them for--a sign both of their good will and of the importance they place on training new members of our discipline.

Let me first outline what happens to a manuscript when it is sent to one of our journals. I will use CQ as my example, since I know it best; the others follow more or less similar practices. We have asked that authors send us two, preferably three, copies of a manuscript; that it not be currently under consideration at any other journal; that the author's name appear only on the title page, to preserve anonymity in the process of review.¹ When it is received we acknowledge receipt to the author, and refer the manuscript, without the title page, to two or three of our associate editors who are, in the judgment of the editor, most likely to render a competent review. We have asked associate editors to return manuscripts to us in three weeks--that has worked about half the time, but there have seldom been really long delays.

After the referees have offered their advice, I have gone over the manuscript in detail, made a decision, and replied to the author, sending along my own comments as well as those of the reviewers.

There are four typical categories of advice: accept; accept with some minor revisions; return to the author with suggestions for extensive revisions and express a willingness to review it again if such revisions are made; or reject.

In the vast majority of cases, we have asked for at least minor revisions, and have usually requested moderate to major revisions. In the three years of my editorship we have published almost nothing that has not had to be revised. Many of the essays we eventually published were revised two or three times, often after an initial review in which two out of three associate editors had advised rejection. On the other hand, at least 6% of our manuscripts were sent back to the authors requesting fairly minor revisions, and expressing our enthusiasm, but were never seen again. A much larger percentage requested major revisions and were never seen again.

Several of the editors I consulted commented on the importance of revision. Nebergall writes that several manuscripts "were seen by our editorial board

perhaps three or four times, often resulting in a publication which bore little resemblance to the initial submission." Mills reports that in two years on Journal of the American Forensic Association and two more on Western Speech, only one essay was printed without revision (the author was Wallace Bacon). Scott is particularly emphatic on the subject of revision: "Do rewrite if requested. . . . I did not encourage rewriting when I did not want it."

I know of no other discipline in which editorial staffs treat manuscripts with more care or offer more thorough advice about revision. In many disciplines, work is simply accepted or rejected, period; sometimes rejections are accompanied by mildly insulting observations on writing or research. It is not uncommon for an author in our field to receive several pages of advice from each of two or three associate editors, and a letter of advice from an editor, along with a copy of the manuscript with possible corrections indicated. You should know that this happens to full professors as well as to graduate students, and that it is not meant to be discouraging. Quite the contrary: it makes us, I believe, one of the most tightly knit and professional of academic fields. If you expect to publish in speech communication, expect to be invited to revise. Don't waste the time of highly qualified journal referees, themselves usually at the height of their productive careers, by submitting manuscripts you are going to be unwilling to rewrite.

Of course, you will often receive conflicting advice from referees who, in my experience, usually agree on whether to accept or reject but often disagree on why and what can be done about it. Just because reviewers disagree does not indicate that they are incompetent. Such disagreement often means that an author has not been sufficiently clear. A revision need not follow the advice of a reviewer, but should almost always take it into account.

We have followed the practice at CQ of putting most manuscripts we intended to publish into the hands of graduate students acting as editorial

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interns and asking them to check all quotations and footnotes for form and content.² In three years only one or two manuscripts were without major errors. Quotations were often inaccurate, footnotes were in improper form, page numbers were in error. If you value your reputation as a scholar, I advise checking all your footnotes and quotations, at the point when your essay is ready to send out for review, against the original source--not against your own notes. Not all journals will do this sort of checking for you.

What are your chances of being accepted? Table 1 shows the number of manuscripts received as compared to the number published for ten editorial terms of 6 journals. The percentage of manuscripts published runs from a low of about 16% to a high of about 36%.³ For the field as a whole, an article rejected by one journal may be accepted by another, and so the actual rate of acceptance across the field may be fairly high. What does this mean to you as an author? If an essay is rejected by one journal, and you feel it has merit, send it to another, and another. If the first rule of publishing is to revise, the second is to be persistent.

A word of caution, however. Several of the editors I corresponded with advise that it is important for you to submit your manuscript in the style of the journal. If you have tried and failed at one journal, don't send your manuscript to another without making sure that you are sending clean, unmarked copy, with a title page and footnotes in the form requested by the second journal. If you don't adapt, you are sending an editor either an insult or a sign that you are neither careful nor competent. How do you suppose that will influence your chances of acceptance?

Who is likely to get published? Table 2 shows that those at the beginning of their careers, or in mid-career, were most likely to publish, but that those just entering the field were as likely to publish in Communication Quarterly as full professors. In a three-year term, most authors were assistant

professors (31); followed by associate professors (28); and with an equal number of graduate students and full professors (10 each). My wife looked at the table and suggested that the rarity of essays by full professors was a good argument for doing away with tenure, but it may be that these figures only hold true for a "regional" journal: we may be more likely to accept an article by a graduate student, and less likely to receive one from a full professor than QJS or Communication Monographs.

Is co-authorship a good way to get into print for a new author? About one out of every four articles we published was the work of more than one author, though not every team involved a graduate student. In the sciences it is typical for emerging scholars to publish their first articles under the direction of a senior researcher, and the more I see useful research hidden away in M.A. theses and Ph.D. dissertations, and never published, the more I believe it would be useful for graduate students to seek the help of professors in publishing a first article or two, even if they had to accept junior authorship as the price of an apprenticeship. A published essay is very different from a good term paper, or from a thesis or dissertation, and learning how to make the transition is too often left to luck in our field. My advice is to collaborate with a person of experience you can trust, and not to feel too jealous about credit lines--though you should stick up for your rights, and demand senior authorship if you deserve it. This is a matter best agreed upon, painful as it is to discuss it, before the collaboration begins.

On what grounds are manuscripts usually accepted or rejected? Looking back through my files, I find that our criteria in practice are very similar to what the textbooks will tell you: Is it news? Is it clear? Does it specify a research question and develop an adequate means for answering it? Is the scholarly apparatus handled appropriately? Is it relevant to the readers of our journal? Is it adequately grounded in the scholarship of the field?⁴

In scholarship, the demand that something be news is not the same as requiring that it be totally original and unexpected. Too many young scholars waste their time pursuing exotic, over specialized, under-researched, and, in the end, futile promises of originality, or tout their work as the first step in a new path of research. What we need are fewer declarations about new research vistas and more genuine contributions to ongoing lines of research.

What does it make sense to write about? In my opinion it is wise for you to regard graduate school, and your first several years after school, as an apprenticeship in which you are perfecting your craft. It is never too early to be ambitious about publishing, but, in general, editors are not going to be interested in pieces of pure speculation by younger scholars. Of course, the very few who are most gifted do not need my advice here--they will have their own questions and methods. But for the rest of us, I would paraphrase the advice that Ralph Vaughan Williams gave to British musicians: that in any generation there will be very few musical geniuses, but there can be many sincere national composers. What would constitute sincere scholarship in our field? In my view, the young scholar can best develop his gifts by investigating, whatever his method or field of interest: what do people actually do in the behavior of communicating? There is much that we do not know about how people actually communicate, and about how men and women have communicated in the past. For aspiring rhetorical critics, speech scientists, and communication theorists, speculation must be built upon a variety of carefully researched investigations into the actual behavior of communicators.

And so, what are the rules of getting published? First, revise, and revise again. Revise before submitting your manuscript to a journal, and revise when the editorial board offers its advice. Be persistent; if you are turned down by one journal, try another. If you have to abandon one manuscript, or even a line of research, pick another. Avoid the temptation, whenever possible, to

submit an article telling the profession what it ought to be writing about: instead, set the example by writing about it yourself. Be sincere, by which I mean, build scholarship one piece at a time out of carefully researched investigations of particular communicative behaviors and situations, whatever your field of interest or method.

For the teacher and scholar, a constant willingness to engage in research, to have a big enough ego to offer the results for publication, and enough humility to accept and learn from the criticism of peers, is the path to self improvement, and the opportunity to make a contribution. Those who do research in our field are truly a community, and each ~~contributing~~ author and editor is working not only for the personal rewards that follow from publication but to make a contribution to society, and to leave a permanent record of a way of looking at the most central and significant of all human activities. Your published scholarship will be your testimony. A career in academic scholarship never fully repays in promotion or salary raises the hours of labor: much of the motivation for scholarly work must be personal and communal. Perhaps it is for the best that scholarship in our discipline is a product of the passions of the amateur and the methods of the professional.

FOOTNOTES

¹Consult recent issues of the journal for form, and learn to follow the appropriate style manual, usually The MLA Style Sheet, 2nd edition, or the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2nd edition.

²Our editorial interns were Robert Harrison, Molly Wertheimer, Robert Miller, Nola Heidelbaugh, Marcia Shaw, Mark Di Benedetto, John Greene, and Marty Medhurst. Their efforts to save authors from blunders were heroic.

³Nebergall: "I had the feeling that our relationship between submission and acceptance was about right. We passed by little that cried out for publication. While others can and should make this judgment, I believe we published little that should not have been published. There were two or three pieces we dealt with in a rather summary fashion at the end that I wish we could have published but that, I believe, was a function of time pressures more than a function of space."

Scheidel: "Many of the articles we received were poorly conceived and written and were unpublishable in any form and in any place. Others were not significant enough to warrant space in a national journal but were not bad at all. Still others were acceptable and could have been good publications but we simply did not have the space to run them. I believe that one can find a place now for any good publication. At the same time, it is not easy to place marginal work."

⁴Fisher comments that "the best way to get published, I would say, is to have 'news' to offer and to offer it convincingly. The main problem I see is people trying to hurry into print--before the person is really in possession of his/her material. A second problem is lack of awareness of what is significant and what is not."

Scott offers a number of observations about practices that may tip the balance of editorial decision: "He advises authors to adapt their manuscripts to the journal: 'Send to the person currently the editor. It makes a bad impression to have one forwarded! . . . Send the requisite number of copies. . . . Use the requisite style sheet. Remember: If an editor says 'yes' he/she is saying also, I'm going to have to work with this person. If the person begins by being careful in little things, the editor, consciously or not, will be encouraged to think that the task may be undertaken without too many qualms. . . . In addition, if issues (that is concerns, disagreements and agreements) are picked up from past numbers of the journal, then the editor will be positively encouraged. . . . Do not argue. . . . For some reason the first impulse is to argue. Wait a week. I've seen some that seemed to me if they had spent the time and energy working on the piece as they worked telling me why the piece was perfect, it may well have approached that fabled condition.'"

"Above all, do not even hint 'if this piece is not published, I shall not be tenured, I shall take my life, my wife and daughter will have to resort to a life of ill-fame, . . . and all will be your fault.' I got a couple of these; I think editors currently may be getting more. I sympathize. But having caught the hint, I am disabled from making any editorial judgment, and consequently, sent the piece back without considering it further. And I said flatly why."

TABLE 1

PUBLICATION RATIOS FOR JOURNALS IN COMMUNICATION

Communication Monographs (Bowers)

First year: 123 received; 16 accepted.

Communication Monographs (Nebergall)

527 received; 98 accepted (19%)

Speech Monographs (Scheidel)

c. 1/6 or 1/7 accepted

Quarterly Journal of Speech (Scott)

c. 800-900 received; c. 125 accepted (c. 1/8)

Quarterly Journal of Speech (Black)

697 received; c. 125 accepted

Journal of the American Forensic Association (Mills)

c. 50% accepted.

Central States Speech Journal (Ochs)

c. 250 received; c. 40 published

Southern Speech Communication Journal (Eubanks)

1975-1976: 106 of 138 rejected (80%)

1976-1977: 65 of 101 rejected (64%)

1977-1978: 33 of 52 rejected (64%)

Western Speech (Mills)

c. 25% accepted.

Western Speech Communication Journal (Fisher)

c. 270 received; c. 70 published (12 commissioned)

Communication Quarterly (Benson)

For 10 issues: 333 received; 71 published (21%); 2 issues were commissioned

TABLE 2

AUTHORS OF ARTICLES IN COMMUNICATION QUARTERLY,
1976, 1977, 1978 (only the first author is counted).

Graduate Students	10
Instructors	2
Assistant Professors	31
Associate Professors	28
Professors	10
Other	4
Number co-authored	20